

# What makes a tyrant?

Tom Harrison

Ancient Greece is known to the modern world primarily as the cradle of democracy, but this was not the only form of political organisation it knew. Greek political theorists imagined three basic types of constitution: democracy (rule by the people), oligarchy (rule by the elite), and monarchy (rule by one person). In this article, I want to concentrate upon monarchy, and in particular upon one type of monarch: the tyrant.

What is a 'tyrant'? The first use of the term in Greek (the word is near-eastern in origin), suggests indeed that a tyrant was normally a figure to emulate: the speaker in a verse of Archilochus (eighth century B.C.) declares that he cares nothing for the wealth of the Lydian king Gyges; he has, he says, 'no desire for a great tyranny'. In its earliest usage, the word seems to refer (without any moral judgement) to figures who seized power, rather than inheriting it. The best known such figures in the seventh and sixth centuries are Cypselus, the ruler of Corinth, Polycrates of Samos, and Peisistratus of Athens. But there are many many more: minor figures who make only fleeting appearances in our sources, such as the notorious Phalaris of Akragas, who is supposed to have roasted his enemies in a large bronze bull.

By the fifth and fourth centuries, however – the period of the height of Athenian democracy – it seems already to have had the negative connotations of the modern word. 'The tyrant changes established laws, rapes women, and kills people without trial', according to a character in Herodotus. Similarly, Aristotle in his *Politics* draws a sharp distinction between the unconstitutional tyrant and the king, whose rule was limited by convention.

## Strong leadership

The frequency of tyranny in the archaic period poses something of a problem for historians. Democracy, we like to believe, was somehow an inevitable development in Greece, the result of intrinsic features of Greek society (its organisation into city-states, for example, each a small, 'face-to-face' community). How was it then that, not so long before, many of the same cities underwent tyranny? (And how was it that tyrants continued and prospered in parts of Greece throughout the classical period?). One way of making sense of tyranny is the (on the face of it rather paradoxical) suggestion that it represented a transitional phase in the development of the Greek city. Tyrants, according to this line of thinking (which goes back to Aristotle), were popular champions, who provided a voice – and strong leadership – for a common people who were aggrieved at their treatment but were not quite ready to speak up for themselves. The moment at which the tyrants were ejected from their cities was the moment at which the people realised that they could do it for themselves. And they never looked back.

## The people's party

It is hard not to feel uneasy about any theory that argues that the firm leadership of a strong man is necessary for the people's own good. But there are in fact some grounds for linking tyranny with popular discontent. In Athens, in particular, we have evidence for this kind of discontent: the rural population were in debt, the aristocrats who ruled the city were unaccountable. The sixth-century law-giver Solon, we know, grappled with these prob-

lems; and it is likely that they underlay the rise of the tyrant Peisistratus some thirty years later.

In some of the cities that underwent tyranny, there are hints also of regional divisions: those from outlying areas of a city's territory may have felt alienated from the politics of the city. So, for example, the Corinthian Cypselus came from a far-flung village called Petra. The Peisistratus headed one of three aristocratic factions that dominated sixth-century Athens, each with its local power-base; his party was that of 'those from beyond the hills'.

In other cases, however, it may be misleading to look for deep causes. Some tyrants were mere opportunists, inspired by each other's example – or often by a relative who was a tyrant elsewhere. Polycrates, for example, seized power with a mere handful of men and then continued to grab things until he had a naval empire spreading over much of the Aegean; Herodotus paints a picture of him as a splendid adventurer. In a case like his, instead of asking 'why?', we should perhaps ask 'why not?'

## Dodgy dossiers

There is another question to ask, however, which perhaps receives less attention than it should. What can we believe of any of our accounts? The snippets on Greek tyranny that can be gleaned from the *Politics* were compiled by Aristotle and his assistants – admittedly from earlier written accounts – two or three centuries after the events themselves. Even our earliest substantial source, Herodotus, wrote his accounts of Peisistratus or Cypselus in the 430s and 420s: that is over 200 years after Cypselus' rise to power, and 130 years after Peisistratus'.

Herodotus too relied on earlier material. His sources, however, were more often oral than written. This kind of material, oral tradition, presents special difficulties to the historian. An original version of an event does not remain intact in a neat parcel as it gets passed on from generation to generation. Rather a story is likely to have been remoulded by any number of factors: political bias, the desire to make a good or plausible, or just neat, story, and of course forgetfulness. The speaker in an Athenian law-court speech, for example, talks proudly of how his ancestors had defeated Peisistratus at a battle of Pallene – yet in Herodotus' account Pallene was a victory of the tyrant against the city. Which do we believe? Let us not forget that Herodotus too has a subtle literary agenda of his own: his stories echo and play off each other, making it very hard to read (or interpret) them in isolation from the text as a whole.

After all of this, what can we rely on? Working through to a straightforward picture of what happened is not so easy, but if one accepts this – and if one looks out for all the factors that may have shaped a tyrant story – one can find out much more.

## Misleading the commons

Take, for example, just one story: Herodotus' account of the rise to power of the Athenian Peisistratus. According to Herodotus, it took Peisistratus three goes to establish his rule over Athens. His final attempt to seize power was fairly conventional: he raised money (from named peoples and individuals: the Thebans and Lygdamis of Naxos), he scratched together a force of mercenaries, and then invaded the territory of Athens and defeated his fellow citizens in a battle, the battle of Pallene.

Peisistratus' first two attempts, however, are suspiciously light on such details – and at face value seem also more like folklore than history. On the first occasion, Peisistratus wounded himself and then rode into the city on a mule-cart (he had also wounded the mules), claiming that he had been attacked by his political enemies. The people were convinced, and voted him a bodyguard of club-bearers for his protection, a bodyguard with which he then seized the Acropolis and ruled Athens.

His power was short-lived; the other two regional parties ganged up on him and expelled him. Peisistratus' second attempt at power was even more fanciful then. He dressed up a tall and beautiful girl – named Phye (Growth or Renaissance?) – as the goddess Athena, put her in a chariot, and rode alongside her into town. Meanwhile, horsemen rode ahead, proclaiming that Athena was bringing back her favourite to Athens. The Athenians – reputed to be the cleverest of the Greeks according to Herodotus – fell for it. Again, though, his rule did not last long. He had been supported in his return by one of the other 'party-leaders', Megacles. Their alliance was sealed with the marriage of Peisistratus to Megacles' daughter, but Peisistratus refused to sleep with her – at least not 'in the customary fashion' – for fear of incurring a hereditary curse. And so their alliance crumbled.

### Serious discrepancies

Mostly ancient historians learn to live with these stories – apart from anything else, they are good stories. But, from the point of view of historical plausibility, one has to admit that there are problems. There may well have been regional factions in Athens, but Herodotus' three parties are suspiciously neat and tidy. Both Peisistratus' exiles have the same cause: the opposition of the two other factions. And there are some odd parallels between the various attempts at tyranny. After the battle of Pallene, just as in Peisistratus' staged apparition of Athena, horsemen ride ahead, proclaiming that the Athenians should go back to their private business – and leave the city's business to him. And the first attempt at tyranny, Peisistratus' undignified ride on a mule-cart, reads almost like a parody of his arrival with 'Athena'.

So what are we to make of all this? It has been suggested that the story of Peisistratus' return alongside Phye records a memory not of any *coup d'état* but of a festival in which Peisistratus immodestly staged the goddess' support for his rule. The parallels between this story and his final return, however, suggest another possibility: that the story of Phye grew out of his return at Pallene. Intriguingly, the battle of Pallene took place next door to a shrine of, guess who, Athena. This may have led to the belief that his return was thanks to the goddess. This belief then may have been transformed into a story in which the goddess (or an impostor) actually brought him back.

Herodotus' account reveals other cracks and contradictions. Though Greeks admired tricksters, it is Peisistratus' trickery – and his need to use force in imposing his rule – that marks him out as a tyrant. At the same time, though, some strikingly positive details stand out. The observation, for example, that Peisistratus, even at the time of his first coup, was already popular because of a successful military command suggests that such extreme cunning may not even have been necessary. Peisistratus is said then (in his first period of tyranny, at least) to have ruled the city well: he made no changes to the laws or to the distribution of offices in the city. How then was he a tyrant? Was he, at least at first, only the first aristocratic Athenian among equals? Finally, we are told that his force of mercenaries at Pallene was joined by those Athenians 'for whom freedom was more welcome than slavery'. This is hardly likely to have been the way in which they described themselves.

It seems likely then that what we have here is not so much a cynical attempt to enslave the city, but rather a clash of Athenian factions. The character of his rule may have changed over time – but it seems also to have become blackened after the fall of his dynasty. The overall shape of Herodotus' version is negative,

but at the same time the story preserves the remnants of an earlier, more sympathetic version. The Athenians did not only build up the splendour of their democracy, it seems, but worked hard to convince themselves of the evils of the tyranny that preceded it. The truth, as usual, was probably much messier.

*Tom Harrison teaches at the University of St Andrews*